



THE CITY OF SAN DIEGO

San Diego Public Library

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SAN DIEGO PUBLIC LIBRARY TO SCREENS “*FREEDOM RIDERS*” TO COMMEMORATE 50th ANNIVERSARY OF THE FREEDOM RIDE” *Companion Exhibit on Display at the Central Library Throughout the Month of March*

San Diego, CA... The San Diego Public Library will commemorate the 50th anniversary of the Freedom Rides on Sunday, March 27 at 2:00 p.m. with a screening of the film *Freedom Riders*, the powerful, harrowing and ultimately inspirational story of six months in 1961 that changed America forever. The Honorable Congressman Bob Filner, one of the two most notable surviving Freedom Riders along with Congressman John Lewis of Georgia, will be present to take questions from the audience.

The companion national traveling exhibit “Freedom Riders” which looks at six months in 1961 when more than 400 courageous Americans - old and young, black and white, men and women, Northern and Southern - risked their lives to challenge segregated facilities in the South, is on display from March 1 to March 31 at the Central Library located at 820 E Street. *Freedom Riders* is presented by long-running PBS history series AMERICAN EXPERIENCE.

From May until November 1961, more than 400 black and white Americans risked their lives - and many endured savage beatings and imprisonment - for simply traveling together on buses and trains as they journeyed through the Deep South. Deliberately violating Jim Crow laws, the Freedom Riders’ belief in non-violent activism was sorely tested as mob violence and bitter racism greeted them along the way. *Freedom Riders* features testimony from a fascinating cast of central characters: the Riders themselves, state and federal government officials, and journalists who witnessed the rides firsthand. Produced, written and directed by award-winning filmmaker Stanley Nelson, *Freedom Riders* will premiere nationally on the PBS on May 16.

“I got up one morning in May and I said to my folks at home, I won’t be back today because I’m a Freedom Rider. It was like a wave or a wind that you didn’t know where it was coming from or where it was going, but you knew you were supposed to be there.”

— Pauline Knight-Ofoso, Freedom Rider

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Despite two earlier Supreme Court decisions that mandated the desegregation of interstate travel facilities, black Americans in 1961 continued to endure hostility and racism while traveling through the South. The newly inaugurated Kennedy administration, embroiled in the Cold War and worried about the nuclear threat, did little to address domestic Civil Rights.

“It became clear that the civil rights leaders had to do something desperate, something dramatic to get Kennedy’s attention. That was the idea behind the Freedom Rides—to dare the federal government to do what it was supposed to do, and see if their constitutional rights would be protected by the Kennedy administration,” explains Raymond Arsenault, author of *Freedom Riders: 1961 and the Struggle for Racial Justice*, on which the film is partially based.

The self-proclaimed “Freedom Riders” came from all strata of American society—black and white, young and old, male and female, North and South. They embarked on the Rides knowing the danger but firmly committed to the ideals of non-violent protest, aware that their actions could provoke a savage response, but willing to put their lives on the line for the cause of justice.

Each time the Freedom Riders met violence and the campaign seemed doomed, new ways were found to sustain and even expand the movement. After Klansmen in Alabama set fire to an original Freedom Ride bus, student activists from Nashville organized a ride of their own. “We were past fear. If we were going to die, we were gonna die, but we can’t stop,” recalls Rider Joan Trumpauer-Mulholland. “If one person falls, others take their place.”

Later, Mississippi officials locked up more than 300 Riders in the notorious Parchman State Penitentiary. Rather than weaken the Riders’ resolve, the move only strengthened their determination. None of the obstacles placed in their path would weaken their commitment.

The Riders’ journey was front-page news and the world was watching. After nearly five months of fighting, the federal government capitulated. On September 22, the Interstate Commerce Commission issued its order to end the segregation in bus and rail stations that had been in place for generations. “This was the first unambiguous victory in the long history of the civil rights movement. It finally said, ‘We can do this.’ And it raised expectations across the board for greater victories in the future,” says Arsenault.

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“The people that took a seat on these buses, that went to jail in Jackson, that went to Parchman, they were never the same. We had moments there to learn, to teach each other the way of nonviolence, the way of love, the way of peace. The Freedom Ride created an unbelievable sense: Yes, we will make it. Yes, we will survive. And that nothing, but nothing, was going to stop this movement,” recalls Congressman John Lewis, one of the original Riders.

Says Stanley Nelson, “The lesson of the Freedom Rides is that great change can come from a few small steps taken by courageous people. And that sometimes to do any great thing, it’s important that we step out alone.”

Freedom Riders tells the story of an overlooked piece of not only civil rights history but American history,” says Mark Samels, Executive Producer of AMERICAN EXPERIENCE. “It’s a story that we knew had to be told. The film touches and inspires everyone who sees it and it’s an honor to be presenting it.”

In addition to the broadcast, AMERICAN EXPERIENCE is hosting the **2011 Student Freedom Ride**, a major outreach initiative which will retrace the historic civil rights bus rides that changed America. Accompanied by original Freedom Riders, forty college students will be chosen to participate in the ride which will take place from May 6 - 16, 2011 in conjunction with the 50th anniversary of the original rides. *Locally, two Grossmont College students have petitioned to participate in the 2011 Student Freedom Ride*. Additional outreach activities include screenings and forums, a 20-city traveling exhibit, full curriculum materials, and a comprehensive website. For complete information, visit www.pbs.org/freedomriders.

Exclusive corporate funding for AMERICAN EXPERIENCE is provided by Liberty Mutual. Major Funding is provided by the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation. Freedom Riders has been made possible in part by a major grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities. Additional funding has been provided by Lynn Bay Dayton, Nordblum Family Foundation, the Corporation for Public Broadcasting and public television viewers.

Learn about other events at the San Diego Public Library’s Central Library and 35 branches, find links to numerous additional resources, or search for materials in the Library’s catalog online at www.sandiegolibrary.org.

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About AMERICAN EXPERIENCE

Television's most-watched history series, AMERICAN EXPERIENCE has been hailed as “peerless” (Wall Street Journal), “the most consistently enriching program on television” (Chicago Tribune), and “a beacon of intelligence and purpose” (Houston Chronicle). On air and online, the series brings to life the incredible characters and epic stories that have shaped America's past and present. Acclaimed by viewers and critics alike, AMERICAN EXPERIENCE documentaries have been honored with every major broadcast award, including fourteen Peabody Awards, four duPont-Columbia Awards, and twenty-seven Primetime and Creative Arts Emmy Awards, one most recently in Outstanding Directing Nonfiction for My Lai.

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